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STATEMENT OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
before the
SELECT COMMITTEE ON NUTRITION AND HUMAN NEEDS
U.S. SENATE

September 30, 1977

- Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I'm glad to have the opportunity to meet with you today to discuss the quality of food provided through our USDA food assistance programs.

We share the Committee's concern over this troubling issue. There is no question that there are serious problems regarding the quality of food served in some schools and other institutions. Nor is there much question about the fact that the Department of Agriculture and many State education agencies have too long been inactive in this area. When I entered the Department of Agriculture eight months ago, I discovered that issues such as meal quality had been largely ignored by policy makers in the past Administration. I am determined that such issues be ignored no longer. To provide children with substandard meals is an affront to these children, to their parents, and to the tax-payers who help finance these meals.

Dealing with the meal quality issue is not going to be simple or easy. Securing improvements in the quality of meals served in our child nutrition programs is one of the most difficult administrative challenges faced by the Department. But we intend to address this issue, and we have in our short term in office made a number of first steps.

Earlier this month, the Department proposed regulations that represent the most significant changes in meal patterns since the inception of the National School Lunch Program in 1946. The new regulations have a number of key components:

1. The proposed regulations would require the establishment of five separate meal patterns -- each with different quantities of food -- for each of five separate age groupings of children. Younger children would receive smaller portion sizes; studies have shown plate waste to be greatest among this group. At the same time, older students would be offered increased portion sizes, but allowed to select smaller portions if they so desired.

2. To allow students the choice of a lunch with a lower fat content, schools would be required to offer unflavored lowfat milk, skim milk, or buttermilk, in addition to whole milk or flavored milk. If a child chose lowfat milk, the percentage of calories in the new pattern that are provided by fat would be 30 to 33 percent. Where the child chooses skim milk, the percentage would range 24 to 29 percent. And even where a child chooses whole milk, the percentage would range between 34 to 37 percent, which is lower than what we often find currently.

3. Additional guidelines, to be issued after the regulations, will encourage schools to give special attention to foods that are sources of iron, and vitamins A and C -- nutrients the GAO Study found short in the school

lunches they tested. Schools will be encouraged to serve foods with relatively low sugar content, such as fresh fruits or fruits canned in natural juices or light syrup, and to avoid excessive use of sugar and salt in food preparation.

4. The proposed regulations would require schools to involve students in their school foodservice programs. In Milwaukee, which is known for its high quality school lunch program, an advisory council of 68 students meets seven times a year to sample meals prepared by the school district and to advise local school foodservice officials on how to devise nutritious, well-balanced meals that meet students' tastes and that will be eaten rather than discarded.

5. The proposed regulations would require that if a school district serves substandard meals, the State must develop, implement, and monitor a corrective action plan to remedy the deficiencies. The regulations also require that if, in a school district, a substantial number of children (a) routinely request less food than the basic pattern would provide, (b) do not accept particular foods, (c) return food uneaten, or (d) choose less than all five basic foods in the lunch pattern, then the State must again implement a corrective action plan. Such a plan would have to involve students in the correction of these deficiencies.

6. The proposed regulations would require that repeated failure by a school district to serve meals meeting the basic Federal requirements would subject the School Food Authority to the disallowance of all or part of the Federal reimbursement payments for its school lunch program.

7. The new regulations would change the bread requirements to allow the alternative use of enriched or whole-grain rice, macaroni, and noodle

These new proposals are important, and will inevitably be controversial. We do not intend to make the mistake, however, of imposing these requirements nationwide without carefully considering informed comment, and then testing them. At present, we are accepting comments on the proposed regulations. In late October and early November, the Department will conduct seven 2-day public hearings in various parts of the country on all of our child nutrition programs. Issues to be discussed at these hearings include responses to the new regulations, and to problems of meal quality in general. Based on the comments and the hearings, the Department will make any changes determined to be needed in the regulations -- and then will conduct a four month pilot test of the regulations from January through April. The results of the test will help us formulate our final regulations, which we hope will take effect nationwide with the beginning of the 1978-79 school year.

Along with the proposed new menu patterns, we are also requesting comment on alternatives to the Type A lunch pattern, particularly the "nutrient standard" approach to menu planning. Under this system, menus would be planned to meet a predetermined nutrient level, instead of the present approach of planning meals around specific portion sizes of specific food components.

Along with that, we have contracted with Colorado State University to study different meal patterns for high school students. Key elements in the study will be nutritional value of foods students choose and eat, student satisfaction, and labor and food costs per meal.

Monitoring and Compliance

Rewriting program regulations and specifications is only one part of the answer, however. While regulations must be modified to improve the nutritional quality of the meal pattern and decrease waste, regulations are useful only if they are correctly followed at the local level. We believe that a key element in improved meal quality is increased monitoring of local school lunch programs, and use of corrective action plans (and if necessary of penalties) where deficiencies are found.

This week, a House-Senate conference on H.R. 1139 approved a new formula that will substantially increase Federal funding for State costs in administering Child Nutrition Programs. It is the Department's intention to direct that with these increased funds, States must undertake monitoring and compliance activities to assure that Federal meal standards are being met.

Improving Meal Quality in New York City

Part of our effort to improve meal greatly is the provision of technical assistance by USDA. Last spring we worked with New York City to help correct deficiencies the General Accounting Office found in New York City's program. The New York corrective action plan is a major effort to upgrade the meal service to children and to improve accountability for Federal funds. Our work with New York cuts across several key areas: organization and management, food procurement, warehousing and inventory, financial accounting, and food service and menu planning.

As a part of this, several New York City schools are taking part in pilot projects to demonstrate ways to improve meal quality and acceptability. Through such projects we aim to help the city develop a system for buying quality food at the best possible price, while tailoring food service to the needs of individual schools.

This is a major effort and we hope it will not only lead to improvements in New York City's school feeding program, but will produce ideas that can be applied in other programs.

On-Site Preparation

The Department also wishes, as part of its overall program to enhance meal quality, to encourage on-site preparation of meals where possible. To this end, the Department earlier this year submitted legislation designed to focus federal equipment assistance funds on the purchase of equipment that would be used to cook hot meals on-site. We are pleased that the provisions we submitted were approved by the conference this week.

We do recognize that these are situations where preparation of meals on-site or at a satellite kitchen may not be feasible, and where delivered or pre-plated meals will be used. It is our intention to strengthen methods of monitoring food quality in these and other types of systems, and to develop appropriate sanctions where meal quality is unacceptable. To this end, we are now working on proposals dealing

with the responsibilities of the school and of the food service company, with the method of payment, and with the contractual process. We believe that a clearer definition of the roles of the government agencies involved, the local school and the food company will help us make better use of their services, while protecting program quality.

School Breakfast Program

We are moving on food quality issues in other child nutrition programs as well. In the School Breakfast Program, for example, a principle food quality issue has been the use of so-called fortified grain-fruit products. We have issued proposed regulations to withdraw approval for use of these products in the breakfast program. They were originally authorized to be served with milk as a convenience breakfast in schools with limited facilities.

These products have been strongly criticized by nutritionists and parents concerned about their high sugar and high fat content. Nutrition educators tell us that use of these products works against their efforts, because it is hard for a child to distinguish the fortified product from the unfortified products on the commercial market.

Further, it turns out that these products are not that much more convenient than serving a simple conventional breakfast of juice, cereal and milk. And we think the conventional foods are far preferable. Comments on whether to withdraw approval for use of the fortified grain-fruit products were due in on September 26. We are reviewing the responses now and expect to announce our decision shortly.

To get a broader view of the nutritional contribution of school breakfasts, the Food and Nutrition Service is initiating a pilot study of that program. The study will look at the nutrient levels of breakfasts served in test schools, meal costs, student participation and plate waste. It is the first such study undertaken of this program and will, therefore, be important to evaluation and planning.

Summer Food Service Program for Children

The Summer Food Program fills the nutrition gap when school is out of session. The program, as you know, had problems of abuse and fraud in previous years. This year we overhauled the regulations for the program and required closer monitoring of it by State agencies to assure that the meal service met nutritional standards. By limiting the number of sites and children any one program sponsor could serve, we discouraged those who merely intended to exploit the program. And by all accounts this year's activity was substantially improved over previous summers.

Moreover, we believe that as a result of the approval by the conference this week of virtually all of the Department's legislative recommendations for further reform of the summer feeding program, that there should be continued improvement next summer.

Finally, to set a high standard for nutritional quality in this program, we vetoed the continued use of a fortified milk drink as an alternative to a snack of conventional foods.

Commodity Distribution

The Commodity Distribution Program -- while it supplies only 20 percent of the food used in school lunch programs -- provides an opportunity to set high standards of food quality. We are working on many improvements to serve schools more effectively. Let me cite a couple of examples here:

As a step toward more informative labeling -- we required the suppliers of frozen turkey rolls for school lunches to list the ingredients on the label, give the percentage of each, and the purpose of each ingredient. We think this sets a positive example for the food industry and demonstrates our concern to local schools using the products.

We are making greater efforts to tailor the foods provided to schools to the preferences of the children and to the food service personnel. Where possible, we want to supply fresh fruits and vegetables. As a first step we are now delivering several truckloads of fresh Bartlett pears to schools in three western States. Because of their perishability, we limited the distribution, so that we could test out our capability to deliver a quality product. Reactions from these schools will help us plan future deliveries of fresh produce.

The Department's Food Safety and Quality Service has instituted a new set of warranties to ensure that only those food processors which meet high standards of plant sanitation and compliance with Federal food inspection and grading regulations will be awarded USDA purchase contracts.

And finally, with 80 percent of the food used in school lunches bought locally -- schools need sound guidance in how to purchase quality food. The Department has just issued a new and comprehensive purchasing handbook to help schools get the best possible food buys.

Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)

Issues of nutrition quality are of special concern in the WIC Program, because the population it serves -- mothers, infants and young children -- are particularly vulnerable to the long-range efforts of poor diet.

The WIC Program and the food package it provides are under almost continuous review. In meetings with advisory panels and other groups, as well as in the series of hearings we conducted on the WIC Program last June, there were a great many suggestions for change in the food package.

Responding to those suggestions, we are currently asking for public comments on:

- whether to establish a maximum level of sugar for WIC Program cereals;
- whether to reduce the iron requirement for WIC Program cereals in order to increase the variety of cereals;

- whether to exclude cereals fortified with one or more nutrients to a level of 100 percent of the U.S. Recommended Daily Allowances. Some experts are concerned this may be excessive, especially for the young children served by WIC.
- whether to include whole grain cereals in the food package, regardless of the iron content, as a source of dietary fiber, certain B vitamins, and trace minerals; and
- whether to exclude cereals from the WIC food package which contain artificial flavorings or colorings.

Obviously, we need public study and comment on all these questions, before getting to any specific proposals. The outcome of these deliberations certainly could have implications for the other child nutrition programs as well.

Competitive Foods

This testimony would not be complete without our taking note of the action by the House-Senate conference this week that restored the Department's authority to regulate the sale of foods that make no nutritional contribution to children's diets, but that are sold in competition with the school lunch program. As you know, I strongly supported this provision, and I am grateful for its approval. I would like to commend the distinguished chairman and ranking minority member of this Committee for their leadership on this issue.

The Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs has played an invaluable role over the years in exploring issues of diet, hunger, nutrition and health. We have come a long way since the Committee was first formed, but there is a long way still to go. I sincerely hope that the end of this Committee's tenure does not result in a gap in our understanding of, and sensitivity to, nutrition issues in the years to come.

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